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Comfort Reduces Medical Staff And Many Head Home

From USNS Comfort Public Affairs

ABOARD USNS COMFORT, At Sea - In the northern Arabian Gulf, nearly 480 of USNS Comfort (T-AH 20) medical staff have headed for home after treating nearly 330 inpatients and about 300 outpatients in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). The return of medical staff to their stateside medical centers, clinics and other commands comes as the hospital ship is given orders to reduce from its maximum 1,000-bed capacity to the 250 hospital-bed level.

Comfort had fewer than 100 inpatients on board as of April 25, of which 94 were Iraqi civilians and enemy prisoners of war. Approximately 40 Iraqi patients were returned to Iraq late last week, some having spent four to five weeks receiving significant care and treatment on the well-equipped level three trauma hospital ship.

The ship will remain in the Arabian Gulf with a staff of about 600 personnel to continue to care for the remaining patients. The Iraqi patients will be moved to medical facilities ashore as they come available.

On board to care for the remaining patients will be about 40 physicians, nearly 90 nurses and more than 300 hospital corpsmen. The remainder of the crew consists of supply and support personnel.

A date for the ship's departure has not yet been established. According to the commanding officer of the medical treatment facility on board Comfort, Captain Charles Blankenship, Medical Corps, "We will remain in the area until arrangements can be made for our most critical patients."

Since Comfort arrived on station in mid March, the ship has provided care for Coalition Forces, Freedom Fighters, Iraqi civilians, as well as Iraqi enemy prisoners of war (EPWs). Under the Geneva Convention, the hospital ship treats all patients based on their medical needs.

The first combat casualties arrived on Comfort

March 22 during the opening days of the war to remove Saddam Hussein's regime from power in Iraq. Comfort has treated patients wounded in combat or accidents related to supporting roles of OIF over the past five weeks. As the shift from combat operations turned to humanitarian relief, Comfort has provided trauma care to 196 Iraqi EPWs and civilians.

The Medical Treatment Facility (MTF) on board Comfort is a 1,000-bed, level three trauma hospital with the primary mission of providing mobile, flexible and rapidly responsive afloat medical capability for acute medical and surgical care. Comfort's medical assets support amphibious task forces, Marine Corps, Army and Air Force elements, forward deployed Navy elements of the fleet and fleet activities located in areas where hostilities may be imminent.

Operations are governed by the principles of the "Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Wounded, Sick and Shipwrecked Members of the Armed Forces at Sea" of August 12, 1949.

As a secondary mission, Comfort is capable of providing a full hospital service asset for use by other government agencies involved in the support of relief and humanitarian operations worldwide.

During Operation Iraqi Freedom, Comfort has carried out both missions simultaneously, which speaks to the flexibility of the crew and the hospital ship's

capability.

There have been more than 590 surgeries performed in only five weeks since the first combat casualties were treated on Comfort during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

There have been more than 2,400 radiographic studies producing more than 8,500 exposures, as well as over 600 units of blood transfused in support of the 50-bed casualty receiving (trauma) area and 12-room surgical complex.

Comfort deployed Jan. 6 as an effort to reposition forces for possible military actions in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Comfort is one of two U.S. Navy hospital ships operated by the Military Sealift Command for the Navy. It is normally berthed in Baltimore, Md., and is crewed by about 60 civilian mariners that operate the ship and more than 1,200 active duty Navy medical and support staff that run the hospital.

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DOD Enhances Post-Deployment Health Assessments

From Department of Defense Public Affairs

WASHINGTON - The Department of Defense announced its plan to enhance the post-deployment health assessment process April 29. One improvement is a more comprehensive examination that will better assist

medical personnel in evaluating the health of returning service members.

The new form is an enhanced version of the previous tool, designed to gather more information from deployed service members about events that occurred during a deployment.

Health assessments will be conducted face-to-face with trained health care providers and will include discussion and documentation of specific items. In addition to the health assessment, blood samples will be taken within 30 days of leaving the theater. The blood samples will be forwarded to the DoD Serum Repository for archival purposes.

These enhancements are just one piece of the total force health protection program that includes increased environmental surveillance, electronic medical record keeping and improved unit location data.

"The Department of Defense's force health protection program is constantly evolving based on advancements in medical practice, new technology and lessons learned from deployments. The enhanced post-deployment health assessments and the new blood draw procedures are a result of that process," said Dr. William Winkenwerder, assistant secretary of defense for health affairs. "The physical and mental health of our service members is essential to overall force readiness."

This is a commander's program. Commanders are responsible for complete redeployment processing of their personnel and helping each individual to make a smooth, post-deployment transition, according to DoD guidelines.

Because deployment health concerns often evolve over time, commanders should also encourage their returning service members to visit with health care providers to address all deployment-related health concerns.

The complete force health protection program, including regular blood tests, regular physical examinations, annual dental examinations, annual medical record reviews and pre- and post-deployment health assessments, assists DoD in providing a world-class continuum of care from accession to separation.

Further information regarding the DoD force health protection program can be found at www.ha.osd.mil/fhpr.

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Navy Branch Medical Clinics Hawaii Offers Health, Wellness on Wheels

By Journalist 3rd Class Sunday Williams, Navy Region Hawaii Public Affairs

PEARL HARBOR, Hawaii - Navy Medicine has expanded its horizons. A double grand opening was held recently

for the new Wellness Vehicle and new Wellness Center at Naval Medical Clinic Makalapa.

The Wellness Vehicle is the first in Navy Medicine, and the Wellness Center is the first in Hawaii for the Navy. Capt. Joseph Moore, Medical Corps, commanding officer of Naval Medical Clinic Pearl Harbor, and Capt. Ronald Cox, commanding officer of Naval Station Pearl Harbor and chief of staff of Naval Surface Group Middle Pacific, performed the ribbon-cutting ceremony on both the mobile and ground centers.

Moore said that he hopes to see more wellness visits at local clinics versus sick visits.

"The health promotion van will allow Navy Medicine to take our expertise to the Sailor and Marine's workspace. For instance, to get a flu shot takes about five minutes. The usual way to do this is for the active-duty member to leave work, get in his car, fight traffic, park in an already overcrowded parking lot, check into the clinic, wait his turn, get the flu shot and go back to work. He or she has lost about half a work day doing this. This van will allow us to bring services like immunizations, blood draws, physical assessment screening and health promotion education, to the workplace and deck plate. It is an idea long overdue," Moore said.

According to Shauneen Miranda, director of community health, the Wellness Vehicle will allow the

Navy to give training anywhere on the island on any health or medical topic needed.

"Both centers are important and very useful," said Miranda. "The mobile center just allows us to reach out to more Sailors and cover more ground."

Miranda said that it took about one year to finish the wellness projects. The Wellness Vehicle cost \$60,000, and the center cost almost nothing at all, according to Miranda. "We pretty much had everything that we needed for the center," she said.

Through the new Wellness Vehicle and the Wellness Center, the Navy will be able to provide training on issues such as eating right, blood pressure, cholesterol and tobacco use. The vehicle can go to all commands including those pierside, allowing them to benefit from the vehicle.

"We worked so hard at getting this van going. It truly is going to improve our forces' health protection," said Miranda.

The new vehicle will also allow the Navy to go mobile with immunizations for vaccines, such as small pox and influenza.

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Comfort Faces Different War

By Journalist Seaman Erica Mater, USNS Comfort Public Affairs

ABOARD USNS COMFORT, At Sea - Since March 20, Comfort has performed more than 590 surgical procedures during Operation Enduring/Iraqi Freedom.

That's over 250 more than the number of surgical procedures Comfort performed during Operation Desert Shield/Storm.

While those numbers might not be staggering, they should be kept in perspective. During Operation Desert Shield/Storm, Comfort was deployed to the region for a total of nine months, performing a total of 337 surgical procedures. This time, more than 590 surgeries have been performed in five weeks.

Although these numbers provide a comparison between both Iraqi conflicts, they are anything but the same for Comfort.

"You can't compare the two wars. It's like apples to oranges - you just can't," said Cmdr. Anne Diggs, head nurse of the intensive care units (ICU).

For Diggs and the ICU staff, they are taking care of more critically wounded patients than in Operation Desert Shield/Storm. This includes a total of nine severely burned patients, which is the most Comfort's ICU has seen. In fact, most major burn units in the States have rarely taken in nine burn patients at one time.

With more than a decade between the two conflicts,

the technology aboard Comfort has changed just as much as the wars are different.

In 1990-91, Comfort did not have the capabilities to perform angiograms. This time, there have been 30 angiograms performed on Comfort. An angiogram is a type of interventional radiology, which allows radiologists to view and repair blood vessels without having to make an incision.

"This procedure has undoubtedly saved some of our patient's lives," said Capt. Jeffrey Georgia, Medical Corps, an interventional radiologist aboard Comfort.

Radiology is another department that has surpassed the numbers from the last war. In 1990-91, radiology performed a total of 1,240 radiographic studies, including 141 CT scans in nine months. This time, Comfort's radiology department has performed almost triple the number of radiographic studies and CT scans, with 3,026 and 311 respectively, all in four weeks time.

However, the medical field is not the only area where technology has changed. Communications has made vast improvements over the past decade. During Operation Desert Shield/Storm, the only way Sailors could communicate with family and friends back home was through regular mail. Now, Sailors can talk on telephones and send e-mail in real-time. There is also satellite television, which allows Sailors to see the news as it's happening.

"Last time, we only had two televisions without news capabilities. We had no e-mail," Diggs said. "It is totally amazing that we can keep up to date with e-mail and the news."

For ICU nurse Lt. Cmdr. Mary Ann Brantley, this is nothing like the last time she was here.

"No deployment is ever the same, and this war is definitely not like the last one," Brantley said.

If there is one thing that is the same about Operation Desert Shield/Storm and Operation Enduring/Iraqi Freedom it is the care that has been provided to patients on Comfort.

"The best thing about Comfort is that we always provide the best quality care to our patients... no matter who they are or where they come from," said Diggs.

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Galley "Juices Up" Range Of Healthy Choices

By Brian Badura, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery

VIRGINIA BEACH, Va. - Eating healthy is now easier for some Sailors in the Hampton Roads area, thanks to new juice selections at Oceana Dam Neck Annex Galley. Sugary juices at the facility have recently been replaced with natural juices.

"We now serve 100 percent, no nonsense juice," said Mess Management Specialist Chief Tom Petroccia, Food

Service Officer at Dam Neck Galley.

One hundred percent refers to the amount of juice expressed directly from the fruit or vegetable. The drinks served at Dam Neck are healthier products that lack many of the artificial sweeteners of other juice drinks.

The idea started when Petroccia met with Naval Special Warfare Development Group Supply Officer Lt. Cmdr. Hillary King Jr. and Navy Environmental Health Center Norfolk registered dietitian Lori Tubbs to develop a nutritious breakfast recovery meal program for SEALs. Because of their rigorous training schedule, SEALs typically burn lots of calories, which need to be replaced for them to stay fit. The team worked to develop a meal package that centered on natural juices and healthy, low-fat foods.

"The food and juice in the breakfast recovery meals helps them to replace nutrients with food, not dietary supplements," said Petroccia.

Since Navy dining facilities often look for healthier meal choices for Sailors, the staff at Dam Neck decided to switch to 100 percent juice for all customers served by the facility. Now, when Sailors line up for "chow", they can drink natural apple, orange, grape and cranberry juice.

So far, the response to the natural juice selections has been good. "Most people who visit the

galley will drink what is offered, so if we give them something healthy, they'll drink it," said Petroccia.

Other galleys in the Hampton Roads area are also considering implementation of a 100 percent natural juice program. The natural juices cost about the same amount as the juices made with artificial ingredients, yet provide higher quality in terms of nutrients.

Dam Neck's initiative to offer healthy food choices helped them receive the 46th annual Captain Edward F. Ney Award for food service excellence in fiscal year 2003. The award, co-sponsored by the International Food Service Executives Association, encourages excellence in Navy and Marine Corps food service programs with the objective of improving the quality of life for all personnel.

"I think we are giving the best possible product to our customers," said Petroccia.

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Lab Offers Solutions - And Rest- For The Weary
By Journalist 1st Class (SW) Terrina Weatherspoon,
Naval Medical Center San Diego Public Affairs

SAN DIEGO - Forty million Americans are chronically ill with various sleep disorders and an additional 20 to 30 million experience intermittent sleep-related problems. The consequences of sleep disorders are

diverse, serious, and often catastrophic, according to a recent study by Stanford University.

"There is a major issue with sleep deprivation in Iraq. Many Soldiers and Marines on the front lines are only getting three to five hours of sleep each night and it is starting to take its toll." said Rear Adm. James A. Johnson, Medical Corps, commander, Naval Medical Center San Diego. "How can they maintain proficiency with a sleeping disorder?"

It would be very difficult, according to Mike Newman, lead neurodiagnostic technician in the Sleep Lab at NMCS D. "Depending on what kind of disorder they have, it could often times affect their daily performance. Fifty percent of the people we see here are diagnosed with a sleeping disorder of some kind, and wouldn't have ever known it without visiting the sleep lab."

A sleep lab is a facility where patient sleep can be monitored and sleep disorders diagnosed. Although a carefully performed history and physical examination are critical, many sleep disorders can only be diagnosed by directly monitoring sleep, according to Cmdr. David Bradshaw, Medical Corps, who currently heads the Sleep Lab expansion optimization program.

A two-bed sleep lab was initially established at NMCS D in 1996, but the lab has now been expanded to include five beds. "Since that time [1996] the demand for sleep studies has mushroomed, as awareness of sleep

disorders increased among both patients and health care providers," Bradshaw said.

Among the benefits of the expanded five-bed lab is decreased waiting time for sleep lab services, availability of studies for dependents and retirees, increased patient satisfaction due to better access and a more comfortable environment for both patients and sleep lab personnel, and increased opportunities for research.

"We are currently investigating ways to improve patient acceptance of the primary treatment modality for obstructive sleep apnea," Bradshaw said.

Sleep apnea, a condition that occurs when a person regularly stops breathing for 10 seconds or longer during sleep, is one of the most common sleeping disorders. During an apnea episode, a person's blood oxygen level may drop. Over time, low blood oxygen levels can lead to serious health problems and early death. Due to their very fragmented sleep, the person has trouble staying awake during normal daily activities, such as driving.

Falling asleep at the wheel is the most costly and devastating problem on American highways, according to the study. Accidents in the workplace due to sleep deprivation are commonplace and damaging to industry. The study shows that every component of society is seriously impaired by sleep deprivation. Therefore the

need for a bigger sleep lab to accommodate more patients was very necessary.

"The new lab aligns precisely with the command's vision of leading in medical excellence and innovation and it will directly affect readiness," said Cmdr. John Grossmith, chairman of neurosciences at NMCSO. "I have full confidence that our sleep lab staff members will continue to impart the values of service, professionalism, teamwork, respect and compassion."

Simply put, sleep represents a third of our lives and it has a tremendous impact on how we live, function, perform, and think during the other two-thirds of our lives, according to Karen Roxburgh, Health Care Operations and Planning, NMCSO. Sleep is as vital to our well being as the air we breathe and the food we eat; yet for many, it is last on our list of priorities.

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Healthwatch: May is Healthy Vision Month

By Aveline V. Allen, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery

WASHINGTON - When was the last time you had your vision checked? Let this month, Healthy Vision Month, serve as a reminder to have you and your family's eyes checked.

"The importance of regular eye exams cannot be over-emphasized," said Lt. Tyson Brunstetter, Medical

Service Corps, aerospace optometrist at Naval Aerospace Medical Research Laboratory, Pensacola, Fla."Eye care professionals really believe that 'the eye is the window to the soul'."

Whether you are young or old, eye problems and diseases can strike at any age, according to the American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO).It is important for you to have regular eye checkups to prevent possible eye disorders.Let your doctor know if hereditary conditions run in your family, as they could play an important part in your vision health.

"Regular eye exams can many times catch problem conditions early, well before patients realize that a problem even exists," said Brunstetter. "It's time well spent!"

How often should you schedule eye exams for you and your family?Brunstetter suggests the following guidelines to ensure your family's eye care is monitored regularly during their lifetime.

- At ages six months and 5 years, a child's eyes should be examined by a health care professional.
- During school years, children's eyes should be checked annually
- Young adults to age 65 should have an eye exam every two to four years
- Adults over the age of 65 should have eye exams every one to two years to rule out cataracts, glaucoma and

other eye conditions

The AAO suggests those individuals who are at higher risk for eye-related diseases and conditions should see an eye doctor on a more frequent basis. These individuals may include those with a family history of eye diseases, and other maladies such as diabetes, high blood pressure or heart conditions, and African-Americans over age 40.

Other conditions that should trigger a visit to the eye doctor include visual changes, pain in the eyes, flashes of light, visual spots, excessive tearing, dry eyes with itching or burning, and lines and edges that appear distorted or wavy.

Additional information on caring for and maintaining healthy vision is at www.aao.org.

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Got news? If you'd like to submit an article or have an idea for one, please contact MEDNEWS at 202-762-3221, fax 202-762-1705 or btbadura@us.med.navy.mil.